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ABSTRACT

In the United States, people have become resistant to advertising because they live surrounded by messages. However, in China, the average viewer is relatively naive about the use of commercial messages. An attempt was made to teach Chinese college students semiotic analysis of television commercials. Observations of Chinese television were made to record the types of appeal, the use of symbols, products being marketed, and the timing of commercials and programs. Thirty-six undergraduate students kept logs of the programs and advertising they watched (approximately 900 advertisements). They were instructed to analyze the commercials in terms of H. A. Murray's list of appeals. Students initially were skeptical that commercials contained emotional appeals but learned to recognize and accept their presence. In some cases, presentations were actually counter to Chinese culture. Student response indicates the enthusiasm with which these students became aware of techniques and appeals being used to entice them. When this aspect of visual literacy can be related to Chinese traditions of storytelling, literature, and art, a new Chinese cultural media literacy will emerge. (Contains 5 references.) (SLD)

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Teaching a Semiotic Analysis of Television Commercials to Chinese College Students

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Teaching a Semiotic Analysis of Television Commercials to Chinese College Students

Ellen Elms Notar

A return visit to the Peoples Republic of China to once again teach college students in Beijing,provided an interesting pilot research experience. Funded by a faculty exchange grant from the United States Information Agency the assignment was to teach "American Studies" through the Foreign Language Department of The Peoples University of China in Beijing. This topic included the history of American education and the use of American English. Upon arrival at the university the director of the department asked whether it would be possible to add a series of additional lectures or discussions with the students. This required some thought.

The topic became very clear after a long walk outside the University's campus and after turning on the televison set in my room, which was shrouded with a red velvet cover, and displayed hundreds of advertisements in living color. Capitalism was raging in 1992 Beijing!. What a shock!.

A prior visit to China in 1985 was quite a different place. Beijing was still very conservative. The stores for the Chinese were stocked with only the basic necessities of life, in sharp contrast to the Friendship Stores for foreign tourists, run by the government, which contained a wide variety of goods from China and around the world. These stores were not open to most Chinese and were still very limited in their offerings by foreign standards. Today, not only is the variety of goods and services available to the urban Beijing Chinese equal to almost anywhere in the world, but stores, shops, street stalls and services are available everywhere in the city. The 1992 Chinese male student was dressed in blue jeans, T-shirts screaming Chicago Bulls and the Simpsons; the female college students were in mini-skirts and wearing make-up. English has now completely replaced Russian as the second language for school children, starting in third grade.

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The walk of mind-boggling recognition that not only had the Chinese entered the world of aggressive capitalism, but they were enjoying the changes and saw the ties to their own communist philosophy as part of the "economic reforms". Turning on televison that evening was even more of a shock. In 1986 T.V. programming was limited to a few hours in the evening, usually black and white programs with a heavy emphasis on Chinese government "thought and moral education". Summer 1992 brought quite a different picture to the screen. A great diversity of color television programming filled five or six channels broadcasting most of the day and evening. A day's program offerings included instructional television courses for adults and children, health shows, Chinese soap operas, folk art performances, Chinese classical operas, game shows, sporting events, variety performances, children's cartoons, a British detective series, feature films, and a forty part series "Flying Fox on Snow Mountain" adapted from Jin Yongs' two kungfu novels.

One of the most fascinating aspect of the proliferation of Chinese television was the accompanying advertisements which were shown in 4-6 minute blocks of time so as not to interrupt the programming. Normally a sophisticated or jaded American audience would take this time for a trip to the kitchen or whatever. For the Chinese television viewer this is another total aspect of the programming presented. Advertising is a part of the entire event , equally as entertaining as the programs, and filled with new information - a world of consumer information. The decision was made; I would teach my young students a semiotic analysis of television related to commercial messages, a topic which had been of interest for several years.

Developing Cognitive Filters

It was believed that assisting students to develop cognitive filters to create understanding should enable them to understand the intent of advertisers. Semiology, the science of signs, is concerned with how meaning is generated in "texts", films, television, and other works of art. The interest in signs and their meaning has a long history. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and his "Course in General Linguistics" suggested the possibility of a semiological analysis. Saussure divided the sign into two components, the signifier, or sound image, and the signified, or the concept. An American, Charles Saunders Pierce (1839-1915), built upon this notion by examining the aspects of signs as iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions. The icon is something we can see, the indexical is something we can figure out, and the symbol is something which must be learned.

A basic concern is how meaning is generated and conveyed, with particular reference to the commercial message appeals conveyed in television. Thus, the television is our "text" for purposes of analysis. Unlike the United States, where people have become stoutly resistant to advertisement because we live in a blizzard of messages, the average Chinese viewer is relatively naive regarding the use of commercial messages which foster, even

create a materialistic orientation. The use of effective advertising was understood very clearly by the late media analyst, Marshall McLuhan. He states in his book Understanding Media, "The continuous pressure is to create ads more and more in the image of audience motives and desires" (1964).

Commercial T.V. is predominately governed by an aesthetic of realism, of images and stories which fabricate the real and attempt to produce an effect of reality. It is subordinate to narrative codes and to story telling. Producers believe audiences are most entertained by stories, by narrative with familiar and recognizable story lines, characters, plots and messages. Critics of television like to tell us that t.v. is the ultimate black hole, pure noise, and that all meaning and messages are absorbed in a whirlpool...only discrete images glow and flicker. This is simply not true - people watch and model their behavior, style and attitudes on T.V. images. Would these Chinese students understand this, and are they being caught up in this whirlpool? Would it be able to assist them to sort the wheat from the chaff and enjoy, yet become criticial viewers of this new powerful force in their lives?

Mass communication research has established that frequently watched shows and t.v. ads alter viewers' agendas of what issues, topics and products are important and salient. The Chinese have a long history of iconic-symbol systems and the meaning of television rests on a set of symbolic conventions. Therefore, the symbolic conventions can be manipulated toward a variety of ends. Advertising uses a combination of psychological appeals which are need-based in combination with the symbolic codes of the culture or target audience. Market analysts select samples of the target audience to measure appeal and comprehension. Corrections are made to insure effectiveness. These analyses are in the process of being conducted on what may be the world's largest consumer market.

Methodology

Critical literacy in an image driven culture requires - yes, demands learning how to read images critically and how to unpack the relations between the images, text, social trends and products in a commercial culture. Ads are intented to sell lifestyles. Reading of ads helps individuals to avoid or at least resist manipulation. In James Lull's recent book (1991), China Turned On, he discusses the historical perspective of the manipulations of culture. Chinese emperors throughout the centuries had the habit of destroying all vestiges of cultural life that preceeded their dynasties' rise to power. This cultural extermination, including the burning of books of Confucious, was accomplished in the name of cultural and political unity. The emperors believed that divine intervention was prompting them, and each dynasty tried to establish or maintain a single cultural system (ru) and declared that the ru of the previous dynasty was simply false. In modern times, the classic stories of the Chinese operas have been rewritten to reflect the political climate and values of Communism - the new ru.

It would appear that the

challenge for Chinese leaders today is the management of the culture of television. Television invades the society, not only from within but from the world outside. It is filled with dense information and images which are extremely difficult to edit and manage. Images which tell us much through hairstyles, living conditions, foods, gestures and indications of the products which are desirable to complement our lives.

The decision was to use a framework of analysis developed by the Harvard psychologist Henry A. Murray, whose team had constructed a taxonomy of needs. Murray's list had been used by a number of projects and the study which seemed most relevant was David C. McClelland's extensive examination of the need for achievement. In his book The Achieving Society,(1980) McClelland demonstrated that a people's high need for achievement is predictive of later economic growth. Although access to all the literature which would have been available in the United States was impossible, it was possible to reconstruct the fifteen basic appeals used by Murray.

In preparation for teaching the unit, careful observations of Chinese television were made for approximately one week, recording the type of appeal which observed, evidence of symbols, the product being marketed, the timing of the ad, and the program which preceeded and the program following the ads. T.V. advertising in the PRC appears to be developing into a carbon copy of advertising in the U.S., Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Messages are approximately 12-to 15 seconds in length, the audio is louder than the actual programming and the message appeals are repetitive, being shown over and over again within a certain time period.

Murray's list of appeals which was introduced to my students included : Need for Sex, Affliation, Nurture, Guidance, Aggression, Achievement, Domination, Prominence, Attention, Autonomy, Escape, Safety, Aesthetic sensations, Curiosity, and the basic physiological needs of food, clothing and shelter.

The first session in which these ad appeals were identified and discussed with the students, an element of healthy skepticism was apparent. Yes, they had seen much advertising on T.V., but surely ads were not organized, and certainly they did not contain hidden messages. Assigning homework for the weekend allowed them to analyze the commercials. They were asked to collect the following: the name of the product, or public service announcement, the length of the message, the time of the day or night, the programs immediately preceeding the commercial and following the commercial breaks, and to identify what they believed to be the main "appeal".

Astonishment is the best word to describe their reaction the following week. They were shocked at their own findings and were eager to discuss this further and analyze these emotional appeals being presented. Sexual message were clearly conveyed in "signs" and symbols. Some of the students viewed this as "sinister manipulation" and articulated the "capitalistic thrust" of

this into Chinese society. Others noted the complexity, and that often within one ad several appeals were tied together within multiple symbols. Several of the students commented on the lack of older people in the advertising, which is counter to Chinese cultural norms, where the older person is highly respected. They were hooked! It would be fascinating to learn and enjoy this analysis together. They would be able to inform this Westerner of symbolic meanings which might not be apparent or obvious.

An important aspect of the sign as a symbol, and the fact that the meaning it conveys must be learned is that the symbol is not arbitrary, it is a part of the culture. For the purposes of this brief article, let's use the simple example of a car. The car Toyota, conveys a very different concept than the car Mercedes. Although both would like to distinguish their product as one of quality, the Mercedes carries very different concepts of status, affluence, and longevity - even in China!

What makes all this more complex is the fact that people are not consciously aware of the "codes", and we must analyze this to crack the code. Umberto Eco (1976), the distinguished Italian semiologist indicates the "aberrant decoding...is the rule in the mass media". As Eco puts it, different people bring different codes to a given message: a person's ideological, ethical, and psychological attitudes, tastes, and value systems impact upon the meaning generated. Advertisers are very aware of the power of understanding these symbols and codes and intentionally plug into the appeals which they are able to generate.

Discussions at this point required an analysis of the positive aspects of television and commercial messages. It is important to assist these young viewers to understand that commercial messages serve to educate us, to actually assist us in the decisions regarding product purchases, and to inform them of the costs of producing these messages. Therefore the discussion was broadened to include the use of the camera; angles, editing and lighting technigues, issues of gender presentations, humor and attention gaining devices.

Student Data Collection

Thirty six undergraduate students maintained logs indicating the programs which surrounded the block of advertising, the number of ads per block, type of appeal(s) presented, and the product. Blocks of advertising contained approximately 22-27 ads in a four to six minute sequence.
Using Murray's 15 appeals as our "code" to crack, we analyzed the data collected by the students' observations which consisted of approximately 900 advertisements. Students perceived the symbols indicated the following needs' messages.

Thirty-three per cent of their observations indicated a "sex" appeal, twenty-six per cent of the ads appealed to the need for personal achievement, twenty-three percent gave information on nurturing, and fifteen per cent of the ads yielded guidance information.

Other appeals were scattered throughout the ads, without any significant correlation or statistical significance. Students were able to discuss the particular symbols which conveyed to them an "appeal". Sexual messages were presented with close-up shots of lips, mouths, and elegant presentations of hair, eyes, and the female body, and were used to sell furniture, appliances, beer, cigarettes, cosmetics, Tang, beauty soaps, shampoos, and contact lenses. Achievement appeals used the devices of athletic heroes, film starts, and video stars to sell health drinks, juices, air conditioners, Isuzu automobiles, Yamaha stereo equipment, and Xing Fu Motorcycles.

Appeals for nurturing used babies, older people giving valuable information, and doctors offering medical advice to young families. These ads were always presented in the context of a lovely setting of an office, house or apartment furnished with modern furniture, appliances, lighting and a sense of spaciousness. These are not attributes of most Chinese housing. This appeal for nurturing sold ice cream, cookies, vitamins, contact lenses, Heinz baby food, toothpaste and Nestle's chocolate drink.

Guidance was most often given by athletic stars, medical doctors, and older persons, usually in the context of vitamins, healthy foods, safety devices,insect repellents, and rodent control.

Discussion and analysis

Television is a dynamic force which has changed our interactions with the world. These Chinese students knew all about the Los Angeles riots, who and what had won the Academy Awards and the big name athletic stars in the U.S. and Europe. Ads were clearly selling a new lifestyle to the world's largest population concentrated in one country. People were shown in elegant surroundings of apartments and California-style homes, not the type of housing that one sees in China. The ads were directly related to the expected audience, i.e., toy ads and cereals and vitamins were attached to programs for children where a parent might also be watching. Women and men students noted with some dismay a very new presentation of the young Chinese woman as a "model- looking housewife". Although many of the young Chinese women dress very fashionably,staying at home as a housewife is simply not done in China in the cities unless a woman has retired. The very concept of a "housewife or homemaker" required a great deal of explanation. Attempts to define this term as a woman who worked in the home and not outside of the home met with their consistent response," yes, all women and men do this, but what do they do for a living?" Students decided that this must be the influence of the Japanese in the development of these ads since in the Japanese culture a married woman with a child would stay home to "save face" for a man -" a very old fashioned idea", they said.
Chinese college educated women see themselves as fiercely independent, thus this type of advertising was actually offensive to many of the students.

Research points to a relationship between televison viewing and the

acceptance of more stereotypic conceptions about gender roles(Morgan, 1982, 1987). Studies by Morgan and Harr-Mazar (1980) found that television cultivates attitudes about when to form a family and how many children to have. Studies of T.V. impact on U.S. audiences are hampered because it is very difficult to find audiences in the U.S. who have not been exposed to television. Although the Chinese students had been exposed to t.v., they are relatively novice viewers, and it appeared that their ability to analyze what they were seeing was becoming for them, during the course of the seminar, more and more critical.

Student discussions centered around conventional persuasion paradigms which suggest that commercials provide information so viewers can learn about products, purchase them and then consume them. Social learning theory indicates that behaviors seen in commercials can be modeled, leading to greater consumption (Bandura,1971).
Cognitive development theory predicts that youth can understand the advertising process, learn about the appeals used in the commercials and eventually be able to "vaccinate" themselves by resisting their persuasive tactics with a healthy skepticism
(Ward, Wackman & Wartella, (1977).

Summary

Each week during this visit to China, the English language newspaper, China Daily, was well as Xinhua and other government-run newspapers ran articles and editorials commenting on television and its use for education, "moral development" (translate politics), and entertainment. The Chinese government requires 6.7% of all programs being broadcasted provide for children's needs, and they appealed for an increase in quality children's programming. Colleagues at Peoples University and at Beijing University were unaware of anyone teaching Chinese students critical viewing or semiotic analysis techniques, although business departments at both universities taught courses in how to write and produce advertising.

Teaching literacy today must include the teaching of visual symbols systems, a language which transcends the verbal and written, but can be manipulated and amplified across the world. These are important global skills. Tools to reach students, generate interest in a common dialogue, and educate and inform them regarding the power of meaning making in the new technologies.

Chinese students indicated they would never be able to view commercial messages again without an awareness of the techniques or appeals being used to entice them. Numerous letters from them indicating that they continue to "analyze t.v." have arrived over the last year. It would appear that there is a need to teach our students, wherever they are, to become critical consumers of this powerful technology. A plan to return to the Peoples Republic of China in the very near future and to continue to pilot research with a formal instruction of semiotics is in process. Several educational colleagues in China have indicated they are considering following critical viewing skills be

encompassed in the curriculum for even younger children by helping them to evaluate, understand and manage their own viewing. Teaching them about the business of television, the purposes, and the manipulative devices and strategies as well as the very positive attributes such as the artistic and technical elements of this medium. Relating this visual literacy to the elegant tradition of storytelling in Chinese literature, music and art, will create a new uniquely Chinese cultural media literacy.

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